

Title suggestion: dichotomized discourse in the erasure of bisexuality

Abstract

A combination of Q methodology and a Think Aloud task explored how cultural knowledge about bisexuality is constructed and maintained. Q methodology revealed positive interpretations of bisexuality. Critical Discourse Analysis of the Think Aloud task however, exposed the maintenance of dualistic categories of sex, gender and sexuality acting as 'operating systems' and strategically guiding the social representation of bisexuality as 'non-existent', 'deviant', 'abnormal' and/or 'promiscuous'. The findings of this study suggest that overt heterosexism is not becoming extinct; instead it has found rather subtle ways of incorporating itself into 'liberal' discourses.

Introduction

Bisexuality has been described as the expressed behaviours and/or desire of sexual or romantic involvement with individuals of both genders (Firestein, 2007). The social construction of sexuality divides sexual orientations into homosexuals and heterosexuals, leading to the marginalization of those who do not identify as belonging to these dualist categories (Ochs, 1996). Yoshino (2000) pointed out that a binary system of sexual orientations does not only serve as a form of social control that disseminates negative stereotypical beliefs, but it helps to perpetuate discriminatory acts and disallows for the existence of any category that challenges the supremacy of dominant groups, including bisexuality. Previous research has shown that negative stereotypes of bisexuality are deeply rooted in people's beliefs (Eliason, 1997; Ochs, 1996; Rust, 1993), leading to a system of oppression and discrimination (Herek, Gillis, and Cogan, 1999; Burleson, 2005). It can be said that, as social beings, humans have been conditioned to think binary. However, these rigid constructions of polarized sexual orientations could be underlining the reasons why bisexuality has been widely misconstrued (Ochs, 1996).

In order to explore the ways in which culturally available constructions of sexuality are mobilised to endanger the very existence of bisexuality, this paper employs two methodologies. Q methodology is traditionally used to explore social constructions of sensitive topics as it enables 'quiet voices' to be heard (Capdevila, & Lazard, 2009) and in this study is used to explore the main ways in which participants subjectively construct bisexuality. The use of the Think Aloud task seeks to systematically locate the origins, the developments and use of these personal accounts. This methodological amalgamation enables researchers to go beyond exploring 'what people think about bisexuality,' and unpack the ways in which 'what people think about bisexuality' is constructed, maintained and the purpose these expressed beliefs serve. It is true that this research is concerned with how individuals perceive bisexuals and bisexuality, however, Butler (1999) highlights that sex, gender and sexuality cannot be understood separately because each is intertwined. Consequently, it is possible that the ways in which the participants in this study interplay or disconnect these components from each other, might bring to light their very own constructions of bisexuality.

In *The Epistemic Contract of Bisexual Erasure*, Yoshino (2000) postulated that as social groups interested in safeguarding the wide range of privileges they uphold in the sexual order of society, homosexuals and heterosexuals share common investment in suppressing the existence of bisexuality. He argued that in order to maintain the status of their own sexual orientation, self-identified homo/heterosexuals deploy three strategies to erase bisexuality: class erasure (explicitly or implicitly denying the existence of bisexuality as a category), individual erasure (acknowledging the existence of bisexuality, but contesting whether particular individuals are 'really' bisexual) and delegitimation (acknowledging the existence of bisexuality as a class and stable identity although ascribing a stigma). Some of these strategies can be clearly observed within cultural ideology. For example, popular cultural wisdom endorses the belief that bisexuals are in fact gay or straight (Eliason, 2001) or they will turn gay/straight (Armstrong & Reissing, 2014). Bisexuality is often seen as a 'transitional phase' and bisexuals will eventually fluctuate towards one or the other category of sexuality (Ochs; 1996). Such techniques not only erase bisexuality as a 'class' but they discredit it as a stable sexual identity, virtually assigning hetero/homosexuality as the ontological positions where bisexuals 'depart from'.

Some authors have noted that bisexuality is inherently invisible within the realms of institutional practices and values, thus such ideology is not confined to homo/heterosexuals' interest in eradicating bisexuality, but rather characterizes a wide social phenomenon. For example, Greenesmith (2010) observed that within jurisdiction the immediate legal assumption is the claimant is heterosexual, if not then homosexual, but never bisexual. Bisexuality is only acknowledged when there is self-affirmation or when other parties make affirmative statements declaring that person to be bisexual. When the latter is the case, evidence indicative of the claimant's 'bisexual conduct' with men and women must be provided (Greenesmith, 2010). This notion clearly typifies cultural beliefs that for bisexuality to be 'authentic' bisexual individuals must have sex with men and women (Udis-Kessler, 1990; Rust, 1996; Spalding & Peplau, 1997); thereby underlining the stereotype of bisexuals as promiscuous and non-monogamous (Whitney, 2002). As noted, bisexuality remains fundamentally disregarded because when its existence is finally recognized, it is then stigmatized.

Likewise, Rehaag (2008; 2009) found that bisexual refugee applicants are generally unsuccessful in their claims in comparison to their counterparts within sexual minority groups. The author noted that bisexual identities remain largely invisible within the domains of international refugee law because adjudicators subscribe to the belief that bisexuality's flexibility signifies 'choice' (presumably a choice between heterosexuality and homosexuality), thus conflicting with their essentialist views of human sexuality as biologically-determined and an unchangeable characteristic. Foucault (1978) highlighted that governments make use of a variety of apparatus in order to regulate non-heterosexual sexual expression into 'docile bodies'. Accordingly, Sin (2015) demonstrated how in deciding cases of eligibility involving bisexual immigrants attempting to enter the US and Canada, immigration authorities strategically coupled bisexuality to homosexuality by ignoring evidence of opposite-sex contact; then tactically uncoupled bisexuality from homosexuality by measuring against gender conformity standards, by considering how likely these bisexuals were of 'passing' as heterosexuals. Notably, decisions were made on the grounds of bisexuals being able to meet the 'criteria' for being gay or their ability to impersonate a straight person. Through this, bisexuality was 'reorganized' into the limited number of categories that society readily recognises. As noted by Butler (1999), identities that present incoherence between biological sexes, gender, sexual desire and practice can simply not exist.

The binary classification of sexuality into homosexuals and heterosexuals, the polarization of gender into male and female and consequential endorsements of people's objects of sexual desire, largely ignores the flexibility of sexuality (Adam, 1998). This system of categorization leads to over-generalizations that ignore the differences and similarities between and within groups, formulating group stereotypes that nurture association of inaccurate and distorted 'convictions' about a group to a person's identity (Brown, 1995). For a long time, psychology has turned to cognitive explanations to provide an account of why people behave the way they do, with misinterpretations being understood by looking at cognitive strategies such as the formation of stereotypes (Heider, 1958; Nisbett and Ross, 1980). However, Wetherell and Potter (1992) argued that social cognitive accounts of social phenomenon regard biases as simple failures of human cognition, and in this manner, reduce social phenomenon to "categorical attitudinal statements" that limit scientific understanding in terms of social ideological contexts.

Edwards (1991) furthermore argued that, social cognition researchers have taken for granted the fact that whereas cognitive 'errors' are in fact mistakes, the social categories that activate the stereotypes are based on empirical experience of each individual's corresponding encounters. For instance, some bisexual individuals choose not to be monogamous (George, 1993; Rust, 1996). Although bisexuality is a stable and unchanging sexual orientation (Diamond, 2008), some who have previously self-identified as bisexual have later self-identified as gay or lesbian (Rust, 1993). Others have admitted that having relationships with people of both genders at the same time helps to strengthen their bisexual identity (Klesse, 2005). In this respect, Hamilton and Troiler (1986) contended that grouping people together, for example grouping all bisexuals as non-monogamous or gay/lesbian, can be seen as legitimate knowledge to the extent that these assumptions are based on recognizable characteristics of others. Wetherell and Potter (1992) therefore postulated that "in practice, it is often very difficult to determine where social cognition researchers wish to place the boundaries between veridical and mistaken representations"(p. 40). Consequently, in order to understand a social phenomenon, it is necessary to examine what people say, in what context they say it and the personal historical position in which the phenomenon is occurring (Wetherell and Potter, 1992).

It can be argued that previous attempts to investigate people's behaviours have taken a rather objective approach that merely attempts to infer causal attributions between the formation of stereotypes and attitudes (Wetherell and Potter, 1992). Although efforts have been made to develop psychological methods to explore attitudes which embrace operant subjectivity for example Q methodology, the ways in which expressed attitudes map onto the complex socially mediated constructions of sexuality is rarely explored. This becomes clearer when looking at research, such as the study conducted by Mohr & Rochlen (1999) who reported that generally attitudes about bisexuals were positive in homosexual and heterosexual samples. However, when the participants were given the opportunity to make written comments, they recorded that: "How can one like men and women? You either like one or the other"; "Where you find people that have a problem with bisexuality, I think you'll find people valuing monogamy" (Mohr & Rochlen, 1999, p.366).

Therefore, this current research attempts to take an alternative approach. Wetherell, Taylor and Yates (2001) suggested that when people talk, they are doing a lot more than just recovering cognitive information. According to theorists, language is not only a vehicle to convey meaning but it actively constructs what it means into 'reality' (Wetherell et al., 2001). When they interact through talk, Edwards (1991) believes that people are accomplishing "social action" (p.517). Language is, therefore, a functional tool that is used to categorize

people together or separate them as equal or different, a process in which values are attributed and rejected (Wetherell et al., 2001).

Concurring with Pollner (1987), this research takes an equivalent outlook whereby instead of questioning how common knowledge can be challenged given the great amount of legitimating 'evidence', it is questionable how common knowledge is being maintained given the amount of evidence that contradicts it. Therefore, this paper aims to answer two questions: On the reconstruction of personal accounts of bisexuality, what strategies are used that reflect a dualistic dominant system? And, what purpose do these 'strategies' serve?

Method

Design

This study applied a combination of Q methodology (Amin, 2000) and a Think Aloud task (Van Someren, Barnard, & Sandberg, 1994). The use of Q methodology offered a systematic process of subjective disclosure, allowing for understanding of how participants categorise their individual interpretation of bisexuality; the Think Aloud task was applied to encourage participant narrative of the thought processes and problem-solving strategies when selecting and justifying the Q statements. Thus, offering insight of how accounts about bisexuality are constructed.

Participants

Participants were an opportunity sample of 10 males and 12 females who were part of the researchers' friendship networks. Three of the female sample self-identified as lesbian, six as heterosexual and three as bisexual. Within the male sample, one self-identified as homosexual and nine as heterosexual. Their ages ranged from 18-46 years (mean age 26 years). No financial incentive was provided.

Material

Each participant received an information sheet, consent form and a debrief sheet. A set of 46 statements and a Q deck were also provided. An interview schedule was used to guide further questions.

Concourse

The statements used in the Q method were developed after a rigorous review of the literature, allowing identification of three domains of attitudes towards bisexuality: 1) Legitimacy of bisexuality (Rust, 1995; Eliason, 1997), 2) Acceptance of friendship and/or romantic involvement with bisexuals (Ochs, 1996; Rust, 1995) and 3) Morality of bisexuality (Mohr & Rochlen, 1999). A wide assortment of positive and negative assessments of bisexuality was included, allowing current research to cover all the relevant standpoint aspects of perceptions of bisexuality (Brown 1980). The definition of bisexuality remains contested with gender object choice as a key focus of argument amongst academics and researchers providing a top down perspective on what it means to identify as bisexual (Burleson, 2005). Until the absence of a bottom up definition derived from the experiences

and perceptions of those people who self-identify as bisexual becomes fully embedded in the literature, statements based on current readings reflect this contested version of bisexuality.

In view that evidence suggests that self-identified heterosexual people tend to think of 'gay men' when the gender of 'homosexual' is not specified (Herek, 1994) and that heterosexual and homosexuals' perceptions of bisexuality vary depending upon the gender of the bisexual (Herek, 2002; Eliason, 1997; 2001; Mohr & Rochlen, 1999), the current study has explicitly defined the gender of the bisexual target. Therefore, 24 items targeted beliefs regarding female bisexuality (i.e. female bisexuals are promiscuous), 24 equivalent items targeting male bisexuality; and 2 items not gender specific (i.e. society is more accepting of bisexuality than homosexuality).

Ethical Considerations

This study is in compliance with the ethical guidelines of the British Psychological Society and has been granted approval from the Ethics Committee of Teesside University School of Social Sciences and Law. All respondents have been assured anonymity.

Pilot

Statements content validity was assessed by a doctoral-level lecturer and researcher, who have had extensive experience with topics related to sexual orientations. She was asked to provide an examination of the statements and identify areas of relevance that had not been covered as well as revising inadequately worded contents. Feedback about the clarity of some statements led to more well formulated items, which otherwise would have caused confusion in their interpretation.

Procedure

Participants received an information sheet to read and a consent form to sign. Once these were completed, they were given the statements and asked to record on a 'score sheet' comprising from -5 (mostly disagree) to 5 (mostly agree) the number corresponding to the item (See Brown, 1980).

Immediately after the Q sorting had been completed, each participant was requested to engage in a process of retrospective 'thinking aloud' (Kuusela and Paul, 2000). This process entailed the participants recollecting on their thoughts and feelings when agreeing/disagreeing with statements and providing a verbal justification of their choices. Although this study is mostly interested in the outcome of problem-solving strategies rather than with the cognitive mechanisms underlying them (Van Someren, Barnard and Sandberg, 1994), the Think Aloud task makes it possible, through the participants' verbal accounts, to 'trace' how they search of available information in memory, how they evaluate alternative choices and how they reason these evaluations (Kuusela and Paul, 2000).

As data collection was carried out varying from 2 to 4 members at a time, anyone in the group could intervene by giving their own opinions with regards that particular statement.

Analysis

Data of the 22 participants were analysed via a computerised software program-PCQ (Stricklin, 1987). The different patterns of each individual Q sorting were compared and contrasted through factor analysis; providing clusters of correlations that represented similar and different viewpoints shared by the respondents (Brown, 1993). Representative q grids were then interpreted using thematic analysis of statements positioning to enable semantic and latent unities between statements to be explored (Watts and Stenner, 2012).

Audio-recorded 'Think Aloud' task was accurately transcribed from the original source. Data analysis of the verbal task was informed by the use of Discourse Analysis Approach (Potter and Wetherell, 1987) which allowed for a multi-levelled understanding of how language-in-use as a naturally occurring event, is applied as a mediator between the construction of knowledge and the understanding of reality; and how language practices are used to ascribe meanings, reflect personal identities and negotiate social interactions (Schiffren, Tannen, and Hamilton, 2001; Chandler, 2002).

Coding phase of the analysis was done by a systematic review of the participant's verbal justifications of agreement and disagreement within the Factors A and B. A process of 'de-contextualization' was then carried out as data was separated into units of meaning. Data were then re-contextualized as they were reintegrated into themes that combined units of 'like meaning' taken from the accounts of the multiple respondents. This allowed an exploration of the process relationships underpinning these clusters of meaning (Kitzinger, 1987).

Q methodological results are unpacked by discourse analysis of the Think Aloud task. As Parker (1992) highlighted, a person is not always aware of the language they use; the verbal accounts of the participants through the lens of Discourse Analysis will enable the investigation of the 'fields' of meanings embedded into their discourse. For example, Henriques, Hollway, Urwin, Venn and Walkerdine (1984) argued that the pragmatic nature of language restricts what can be said, thus providing space for concepts and images available from other discourse to come to the surface. The combination of Q method and the Think Aloud task is synthesised in the following way: A detailed thematic interpretation of the factors array is provided. For example: the participants have agreed that it is possible for a woman to be truly bisexual (8: +4). The numbers in bracket represent the item itself and position of that item on the factor array. Then quotes from the transcript are reported alongside the transcript's number from which the quotes were derived: e.g. '...bisexuality is a real thing...it's not like they are pretending...' (Line 55/T1).

Results

The Q analysis – 2 factors had eigenvalues above 1 accounting 27% of variance – each of these factors was interpreted revealing apparent positive constructions of bisexuality. Expressed subjective beliefs around bisexuality were then unpacked by deeper exploration of participants think aloud data which reveals underlying discourses and justifications in which apparently neoliberal notions of equality and acceptance are underpinned by series of discursive and rhetorical strategies which reinforce the erasure of bisexuality as defined sexuality.

Factor A- 'Legitimacy and Morality of bisexuality'

6 heterosexual participants (3 male and 3 female) loaded onto Factor A (λ 4.34) accounting for 20% of the total variance.

These participants appear to strongly agreed that female bisexuality is just as much of a sexual orientation as homosexuality and heterosexuality (9: +5) and that it is possible for a man to be truly bisexual (31: +5). However, agreement that it is possible for a woman to be truly bisexual (8: +4) is less prominent which suggests male and female bisexuals are evaluated differently. Overall, in analysing q data these agreements appear to be characterizing positive views of bisexuals however, taking a closer look into their language of justification, and it is possible to observe that when participants develop their arguments as to why they have strongly agreed or agreed with those items, subtle negative evaluations of bisexuality is embedded into their discourse.

'...bisexuality is a real thing...it's not like they are pretending... it's just that they like one more than the other so they are really one or the other... (Lines 55-57/T1)

'...I think it is possible... even if it is just like a phase... it can happen that a woman may feel like having sex with a man or a women and feel equal pleasure...' (Lines 16-18/T4)

Here two paradoxes can be observed: at the same time that bisexuality is validated as 'real' in the sense that 'yes, it does exist' (line 55: T1); it is also viewed as a transitional state rather than as a stable sexual orientation (line 57: T 1). This perception of bisexuality is consistent with the idea that bisexuals are 'in-between' becoming gay or straight. At the same time that the respondents agree that it is possible for a women to be truly bisexual (line 18: T4), they clearly state that bisexuality is just a phase (line 16: T4).

Returning to the q factor, participants strongly agreed that men can be truly bisexuals (31: +5), however agreement that it is possible for a woman to be truly bisexual (8: +4) is not quite as strong. While agreeing with those statements would perhaps give the impression that the participants view male and female bisexuality as legitimate, ranking the gender of the bisexual target differently, appears to be based on particular ways of making sense of male and female bisexuality. For example, as noted above, the participants seem to characterize bisexuality as a transitional phase and those who self-identify as such will eventually turn gay or straight. Given that as the reasoning of what bisexuality entails, male bisexuals fit the criteria of being 'truly bisexuals' (i.e. they are truly turning gay) more than females. Notice how the participants explain their views and assume that male bisexuals are gay; whereas female bisexuals are straight:

'...do think tho that there are women who are straight and would be only attracted to men but who do mess around with women... whether that's for attention... I don't know... like I know quite a few women who sleep with girls but don't even like girls! They do it for the sake of doing it... for the experience... just to try something new... to have the 'experience'. I have a

friend who's not bisexual, he says, but he sleeps with women 'just for the crack' and I don't understand how someone who has been gay his whole life just snap out and say 'Oh, I fancy women today!' (Lines 72-78/ T3)

Here one of the respondents gives an account of how females- even those who sleep with women- are straight rather than bisexuals (line 72: T3). However, when they provide a version of a male friend, who displays the same bisexual behaviour, the respondent appears to be under the impression that their friend is in fact gay, but sleeps with women 'just for the crack' (lines 77-78: T3).

There were strong disagreements about males (17:-5) and females bisexuals (40:-5) being immoral. They also did not agree that bisexual men are more likely to cheat than gay or straight men (43:-4); or that bisexual women are more likely to transmit STD to a partner than lesbians or straight women (3:-4). On the whole, there appears to be a consensus that bisexuality is not immoral. It is crucial here, however, to understand how participants conceptualize immorality in order to identify the reasons why they are disagreeing with it.

*'...I disagree that male bisexuals are immoral because it is a **matter of personal choice** and **not the case of they being immoral**; there is nothing wrong with it...* (Lines 2-4/T1)

*'...You know... homosexuality and bisexuality and are sexual orientations, they do exist... you know... there is **nothing humans can do about it**... I can even go as far as to say that's **the way they were born**... So saying that it's **immoral, I don't agree with that**... (35-41/T7).*

It is possible to notice that for the participants, bisexuality seems to be a matter of 'personal choice' or a 'life style' alternative (line 2:T1), thus bisexuals are not seen as immoral because a person has the right to choose who they want to be in a relationship with. From a different standpoint bisexuality is seen as a biological characteristic (line 41: T7), thus bisexuals are not considered immoral because innate characteristics cannot be changed. What appears to be at stake here is not the morality or immorality of bisexuality, but rather the participants are providing an interpretation of the 'causes' of bisexuality that might justify the reasons why bisexuality is not immoral. Bisexuality is not granted the same natural state that is given to heterosexuality, instead participants construct bisexuality as a state for which there is 'nothing humans can do about it' (line 36: T7). This formulation makes relevant an implicit consideration that perhaps if it was possible, something should be done about it; namely, reset bisexuality to the 'original' state of sexuality: heterosexuality.

The participants did not endorse the view that bisexual men are more likely to cheat than gay or straight men (43:-4) and also disagreed that bisexual women are more likely to transmit STD to a partner than lesbians or straight women (3:-4). At face value, these views would suggest that the participants believe that a person's sexual orientation does not determine how likely a person is to be faithful to their partner or/ and practice safe sex. However, when participants explain why they have disagreed with the statement, their justification appears to be deeply rooted in negative evaluations of bisexuals.

*'...As much as any other sexual orientation, they still would take pride in their health... they would probably **do even more** because they know the **risk they are facing themselves**' (lines 30-31/T3)*

*'... yeah but most of them are **a lot more sexually active** than my other normal heterosexual people...and it's like they **forget that they don't have anything at all**...' (Lines 3-5/T6)*

The participants appear to be reasoning that bisexuals are in fact less likely to transmit STD to a partner than lesbians or straight women because they are more cautious with their health (line 31/T3). However, what explains this greater cautiousness is based on the justification that bisexuals' health is more exposed to 'risks' than lesbians or straight women. On the second account, the participant suggest that bisexuals are more sexually active than heterosexuals (line 3/T6) and because bisexuals have sexual relationships with more people, it is likely that they might 'forget' that they are not using any protection to prevent transmitting STD (line 5/T6). These accounts provided by the participants seem to be constructing bisexuals' sexual desire as an overpowering need that would lead them to engage in sexual activities with more people. The participants appear to believe that, as a result of this heightened sexual drive, bisexuals endanger not only their own sexual health but also their sexual partners.

Factor B – Acceptance of Bisexuality

2 heterosexual participants (1 male and 1 female) loaded onto factor B (λ 1.51) accounting for 7% of the total variance.

The participants agreed that they would have no problem in having a male (44:+5) or female (18:+4) bisexual friend; and that female bisexuals are able to have feelings for men or women based on the person's personality characteristics and not only on their gender (14:+4). However, the participants considered society to be less accepting of bisexuality than homosexuality (45:-5). Although participants strongly disagreed with not being willing to not date a bisexual woman (39:-5) perhaps meaning that they would, they strongly agreed that they would not date a bisexual man (16:+5), reinforced by their disagreement about seeing no problem in dating a bisexual man (34:-4).

*'... What if they did decided that actually **they want to stay bisexual and date both**?? I would have put all my energy into that... it's **more risky** I guess... I would be setting up myself to failure I think... coz I put a lot into my relationships... it would be difficult if they did go the other way? (Lines 19-25/T2)*

*... **it might even be a bit wrong** but personally I **wouldn't feel like I could trust him 100%**... it would be playing up in my mind ..' are they are going to go and chase boys?' me personally I would always be thinking... 'Well, would they be out there looking for a guy because **I couldn't give them what they want**? (Lines 22-26/T 5)*

The participants' disagreements about dating a bisexual person appear to be rationalized based on different levels of assessment. Firstly, by saying '*What if they did decide that actually they want to stay bisexual*' (line 19/T2) appears to signify a reflection that there is a possibility that a bisexual person may 'decide' not to be bisexual and in turn 'decide' to be gay or straight. Secondly, the participant seems to suggest that by deciding to stay bisexual a person would effectively be dating a man and woman simultaneously (line 19/T2). Finally, they revisit the assumption that there is a potential that their partner would go *the other way* (line 25/T5). From this perspective, the respondent appears to be reconsidering that their partner would either turn gay or straight and choose to be with someone of a gender other than theirs, or 'stay' bisexual and jeopardise the relationship by dating men and women.

On the second account the respondent explicitly states their lack of trust (lines 22/T5) and seems to be under the impression that their partner would feel the need to 'chase' someone of the other gender (line 24/T5). The assumption of *I couldn't give them what they want* (line 26, T5) appears to have an underlying the idea that the sexual needs of a bisexual person would go beyond what they as a man or woman could provide within the limitations of their biological sexes.

The participants considered society to be less accepting of bisexuality than homosexuality (45:-5) which implies that in their views, society is more accepting of bisexuality than homosexuality. However, when the participants reflected upon why they believed bisexuality to be more accepted, their justifications revealed that as a matter of a fact, they believe that being a homosexual is more acceptable.

'...there isn't a stereotypical bisexual... the way you should dress... the way you should act... the way you should look... there is no like an image for that? Like as a lesbian... you follow a trend... you identify with that... but bisexual they step away from that... when you're gay or a lesbian people can reach you better... people know what you are... Lines 63-67/T3)

'...being a lesbian is more like an identity isn't it? I mean like lesbians identify strongly as lesbians but how many people do you hear that will strongly identify as a bisexual?! (Lines 60-62/T3)

The participant's accounts as to why they believe to be more acceptable for a person to be a lesbian than bisexuals appears to be based on the convictions that lesbians exhibit salient behaviours and display visible features that make them recognizable (lines 64-65/T3). Bisexuals however, are difficult to be identified; not only because they do not present these distinguishable characteristics that lesbians do, but simply because there is no *image* or visual aspects of being bisexual that makes it possible for them to be easily read as not straight (line 65/T3). The respondents appear to believe that the ways in which the stereotypical lesbians dress, act and look demonstrate some sort of self-identification with the lesbian community (line 66/T3). Whereas lesbians are perceived as having a 'real' lesbian identity because they bring out a 'lesbian trend' (line 60) bisexuals are seen as not having a 'real' identity because they do not present any typical features of being bisexual (line 67/T3).

Discussion

This investigation aimed to assess people's perceptions of bisexuality by identifying strategies used that may reflect a dominant dualistic system, and observing what purpose these 'strategies' serve. When the participants provided their personal views of bisexuality in the Q sort, agreements and disagreements characterised positive interpretations. However, when the respondents justified the reasons why they have agreed and disagreed with the statements, their arguments were embedded in contradictions that allowed for the disclosure of evaluations that are fundamentally constructed on negative appraisals of bisexuality. Peel (2001) has highlighted that in contemporary times, nobody speaks of non-heterosexuals as "unnatural, sinners, or having no right to be who they are", and instead heterosexist approach has adopted rather subtle ways of incorporating itself into 'liberal' discourses.

Ault (1994) has identified four practices in which she believed that are utilised in discourse in order to 'neutralise' bisexuality, these being: Suppression, Incorporation,

Marginalization and Delegitimation. Some of these techniques were clearly observed in this current research. For example, Ault (1994) suggested that the suppression of bisexuality may be done by the refusal to accept bisexuals' existence. Although the participants in this research explicitly accepted bisexuality as an 'existing' sexual orientation, such acknowledgements preceded denials about the legitimacy of bisexuality, since it is seen as 'just a phase'. De-legitimising bisexuality through discourse actively 'disallows' the existence of bisexual identity and according to Ault (1994), this technique is used in order to maintain the binary homo/heterosexual system, a system in which has its foundations in the binary categorisation of male/female gender.

One could perhaps enquire the reason why this 'strategy' is overtly employed and in response, two arguments that can be put forward. Firstly, note that the way that homo/heterosexuals define their sexual orientation is based on a gender selection criterion of sexual partners (Yoshino, 2000; Israel and Morh, 2004). Bisexuality, however, takes away the constraints of 'male' and 'female' for sexual partners' choices; therefore 'gender' becomes irrelevant (Yoshino, 2000). If gender of the partner is 'out of the equation', the 'criteria' that homo/heterosexuals have used to organize their own sexual identity become 'invalid'; thus it can be argued that bisexuality destabilizes the underpinnings that differentiate the binary sexual orientation categories (Yoshino, 2000).

Secondly, if the stipulation of 'one-gender-desire-only' collapses, Yoshino (2000) argued straights cannot 'evidence' that they are straight and gays cannot 'evidence' that they are gays. For example he suggested that, current culture assumes that all people who express same-sex desire are gay; consequently, those who do not express same-sex desire are straight. Yoshino (2000) contended that straights can only 'evidence' that they are straight by expressing opposite-sex desire, however, they cannot 'prove' not to be gay because it would be impossible to evidence negative in world where bisexuals exist (same analogy follows for homosexuals). It can be argued therefore that, even when individuals recognize bisexuality as a 'category' people employ strategies to 'erase' it because bisexuality appears to represent a threat to homo/heterosexuals sexual identities and their sense of belonging to their sexual community (Yoshino, 2000; Israel and Morh, 2004, Ault, 1994).

This study has identified that discourse around male and female bisexuality being a true sexual orientation was not serving the purpose to acknowledge bisexuality as an authentic sexual orientation. For the participants in this study, in contrast to bisexual men who were perceived to be gay, female bisexuals were not perceived to be lesbians or bisexuals but rather, they were assumed to be straight. In order to explain why female bisexuality has been openly negated, it is noteworthy to reconsider Feminist theories maintaining the argument that in the Western culture, male-female gender organisation promotes male dominance over women (Ault, 1994, Rich, 1980; Walby, 1986). For example, Walby (1986) argued that the domestic and familial roles performed by women fuelled capitalism in way that empowered men's dominance over women and she contended that "the experience of universal or even widespread, institutionalized lesbianism would preclude the domestic relationship between the man and woman from being at the centre of the patriarchal mode of production" (p.66). Therefore, looking from this perspective, it is possible to understand why in contrast to bisexual men, it is not 'desirable' that female bisexuals are perceived as lesbians.

However, whereas there appears to be a male controlled interest that women do not become lesbians, seeing female bisexuals as straight serves a different function. For example, Hester (1992) postulated that, male-female social relations can be seen as a "political

institution whereby male sexuality, constructed as the primary sexuality, serves as social control of women in the interests of men" (p.77). Note that, whereas the social construction of men's sexual drive has been ascribed a 'natural and innate' need for sex, women's expression of sexual desires has been construed as abnormal and subjected to treatment for 'hysteria' (Mottier, 2008); whereas men may be admired for the sexual virility, women who expressed sexual desire were misjudged as 'whores' (Walby, 1990).

Current discourses in this research appear to show that, female bisexuals are perceived to be straight because within a society in which women are refused the right to possess their own sexuality, female same-sex acts is only 'allowed' when it can serve as a tool to provide indulgence to men. For example, female bisexuality is constantly portrayed in hyper eroticized context, such as in magazines and pornographic films which are mostly targeted at the male audience (Ochs, 1996). This kind of ideology may be observed in studies that have measured people's attitudes towards bisexuality, reporting that male's acceptance of bisexuality are directly correlated with erotic fantasies and expectations of threesomes (Armstrong & Reissing, 2014). It can be argued that, the participants assuming that bisexual men are gay establishes the 'homosexual' part of the dualist categories of sexuality and female bisexuals seen as straight evokes the 'heterosexual' side of it. In this manner bisexuality is denied, the dominant binary categories of sexuality are maintained and the patriarchal ideologies that control women's autonomy are perpetuated.

This study has shown that there appears to be a consensus among the participants about the fact that bisexuality is not immoral. Although, bisexuality was not constructed as a type of 'perversion' which has been observed in homophobic discourses (Weeks, 1996), the participants have explicitly attributed 'causes' of bisexuality to 'personal choice', 'life-style' or biological deficiencies. Current narrative employing pathological causes to bisexuality is reminiscent and utterly echoes discourses that attributed 'biological' conditions to homosexuality (Foucault, 1978; Sullivan, 2003) and led to attempts to 'eliminate' it or to 'reverse' it to heterosexuality (Adrians and De Block, 2006). Present discourse appears to be precisely serving the function of actively constructing heterosexuality as the 'natural condition' of humans' sexuality. Wetherell et al. (2001) noted that discourse has the power of regulate what is 'normal' and what 'is not'. Note that since the medical community judge hermaphrodites to present biological 'abnormalities' and practices to 'eliminate' it have been widely employed (Kessler, 1998; Dreger, 1998); and as noted above the 'cure' for homosexuality has already been attempted, it is possible to speculate, with ultimate cautiousness however, what could happen if the ideology of bisexuality as a 'biological' condition is perpetuated in cultural beliefs.

The relevance of how a person's gender performance ought to display the 'appropriate' sexuality may be clearly observed when the participants revealed that being a homosexual is more acceptable than being bisexual. They have justified this belief based on the argument that lesbians present features that make them easily identifiable, thus it becomes 'uncomplicated' for them to be differentiated from straight women. Ault (1994) have found that bisexuals are rejected in the lesbian community due to their accentuated 'straight looks'. Callis (2009) in turn suggested that the construction of lesbians as 'masculine' allow individuals to maintain congruence between lesbians' gender and their sexuality. However, Butler (1999) have highlighted that the construction of what 'a gender' signifies must be constantly and repeatedly performed in order for it to be read as 'intelligible'.

The results illustrate participants disclosing different properties of the same construction of bisexuals as non-monogamous and over-sexualized. Whitney (2002)

suggested that for a person's sexuality to be seen as 'existent' it needs to be 'performed'. Yoshino (2000) then pointed out that heterosexuals and homosexuals perform their sexuality by displaying either cross-sex or same-sex attraction; thus their sexuality is acknowledged as 'existent'. Nevertheless, popular beliefs appears to be driven by the following reasoning: if a homosexual needs a same-gender partner and a heterosexual needs a cross-gender partner in order to perform their sexuality, thus a bisexual needs partners of both genders in order to perform their sexuality (Udis-Kessler, 1990; Rust, 1996; Spalding & Peplau, 1997). From this perspective female bisexuality is granted its existence but in turn, it is associated with promiscuity. It possible to suggest that, for bisexuality to be recognized as a 'real' sexual orientation a bisexual person is expected to have relationships with both genders at the same time; therefore, the condition imposed for bisexuality to exist feeds directly into the stereotype of them as non-monogamous and promiscuous (Whitney, 2002). Discourses in current study may functioning as a way of social control and discipline that aims to discourage bisexuality's existence and de-legitimize bisexual's sexual autonomy (Ault, 1994)

Taken together, these findings have significant implications for the understanding of how 'talk' can organise a range of different 'strategies' which engage and overlap with each other in a manner that leads to the de-legitimation, negation and marginalization of bisexuality; effectively eradicating its existence. This study provides a meaningful insight of how discourses of bisexuality are arranged within a narrative of binary schemes that tightly interlocks and coordinates the functions of only two sexes, two genders and two sexual orientations, in a way that imposes that for a dualistic system to perpetuate its dominance, it relies on the its capacity to make inexistent by means of oppression, those that do not neatly 'fit in'.

Nevertheless, this research is subject to some limitations. For example, in order to comply with the ethicalities of this study, participants were informed right from the outset that once the Q sorting had been completed, they would be required to 'justify' the items' position. Wetherell & Potter (1992) highlighted that individuals do not want to be perceived as intolerant or prejudiced. It is possible that by being aware that they would have to share their 'justifications' among the group, could have led the participants to place the statements in a social desirable manner by agreeing with positive statements and disagreeing with negative ones (Oppenheim, 1992).

This study has allowed the respondents to 'trace back' the particular context that drove them to allocate those statements in a specific place enabling the researcher to address this limitation. For example, it could be identified that elaborations of 'liberal' discourses were embedded in contradictions, disclaimers and rhetoric use of language that were operated in order to avoid to be seen as prejudiced (Wetherell & Potter, 1992) and so even within methodologies which claim to embrace operant subjectivity, neoliberal positions discovered may be underpinned by more discrete and subtle negative evaluations and disclaimers. This study therefore, finds support for Elizabeth Peel's study (2001) in which suggests that prejudice is changing its form from extreme expressions to subtle manifestations. Extending this approach to explore shifts in the nature of prejudice towards other groups for example those people who self-identify as intersexual. Whilst the current study reveals discourses which underpin justifications by heterosexual participants who loaded onto the q factors, it would be interesting to explore the discourses which non heterosexual participants draw on and the ways in which subtle manifestations of erasure might be undermined and challenged.

The findings of this study may have important implications for future practice. For example, it has been highlighted that heteronormative 'thinking' among practitioners does

indeed exist (Ellis, Kitzinger & Wilkinson, 2002; Tolley & Ranzijn, 2006). However, Peel (2002) has pointed out that, given to their chosen career path aspiring counsellors, for example, usually holds positive attitudes towards non-heterosexuals; therefore it is possible that they may not demonstrate overt forms homophobia or in this case, biphobia (Fell, Mattiske & Riggs, 2008; Peel, 2001). By providing an insight of the underlying motives and their significance in the misconstruction of bisexuality, this study has highlighted that counsellors do not only need to be challenged to look beyond the notion of dichotomised extremes of sexuality (Lourea, 1985), but training content could also focus on challenging also the idea that biological sex, gender and object choice should follow each other in a linear fashion (Rapoport, 2009).

The methodology applied in this research may also provide a framework to inform the development of techniques that evaluate the effectiveness of these courses. For example, Fell, et al., (2008) designed a workshop for post-graduate clinical psychology students using a variety pre-training/post-training scales in order to assess attitudes and behaviour 'change'. According to the researchers, there was an overall positive change in most of the measures. However, as noted by Peel (2001) it can be difficult to pinpoint what "counts as a successful challenge to subtle heterosexism" (p. 552). Therefore, such way of evaluating training outcomes are limited to 'objective' responses and may not be capable of capturing subtle heterosexism.

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